



Curriculum Theologiae

Interdisciplinarity as a Means to Effectively Engage with the Abuse in Mission and Church

Jean Messingué, SJ, PhD

<https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.136>

Submitted on: 2021-12-15

Posted on: 2021-12-15

(YYYY-MM-DD)

This content is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Interdisciplinarity as a means to effectively engage with the Abuse in Mission and Church

Jean Messingué, SJ, PhD

Institut de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus

messingue@itcj.edu.ci

Introduction

The collective awareness of sexual abuse of children in the Church and society as well as the efforts to stop it are a major characteristic of our time. For Pope Francis, “we are not only living in a time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift, marked by a wide-ranging anthropological ... and cultural crisis” (Veritatis Gaudium No. 3). To engage effectively with the challenges linked to that shift, Pope Francis thinks that a renewal of the Church’s praxis and policy is needed. This applies to the ecclesiastical studies that must play a key role in this transformation process. How can interdisciplinarity be a relevant means of prevention of sexual abuse in the mission of the Church, *ad intra* as well as *ad extra*? This reflection suggests a threefold answer to this question: it presents the complexity of the issue of abuse within the Church and society, identifies interdisciplinarity as a working means against it, and puts forward concrete action in order to stop abuse, especially sexual abuse.

I Addressing the Issue of Sexual Abuse in the Mission and the Church

The question I am frequently asked on the Media or by people engaged in the work of safeguarding and the prevention of child abuse is where the Church

in Africa stands today. I would like to share my response to this question from the results of an exploratory survey I conducted on the attitude and meaning of religious people and clergy in Africa on sexual abuse.

The sample of 115 participants was constituted mainly by religious people and clergy who participated in a training program on “Psycho-spiritual Counselling” or on “Multidimensional Counselling with children and adult survivors of violence and abuse,” which we organized in a counselling centre we created within the Jesuit institute of theology in Abidjan. This connexion makes it easy for the participants to feel safe and share their experiences by responding to the questionnaire. The other participants are from my lists, so there is also a personal connection with them that creates safety and trust. The number of participants is not representative to make a general conclusion, but it is significant enough to explore a tendency.

From this study, I identified three main attitudes of the clergy and religious people in Africa towards the issue of sexual abuse: Recognition, denial, and avoidance.

According to the results, 10% of the participants think the cases of sexual abuse of minors are too many and 34% for many, which means 44% acknowledge a significant number of the cases in their regions. 34% of participants said they are a few cases, and 25% said very few. Only ten participants said that the cases are null. In total, the participants have witnessed up to at least 98 cases of sexual abuse of minors in five years. This means at least 20 cases each year. This number may not be statistically significant, but it does from an evangelical point of view.

4.3% of the participants witnessed more than five times the cases of sexual abuse that were caused by priests, religious, or seminarian in the past five years, 4.3 % of the participants witnessed 5 times, and 1.7 % 4 times.

There is a gap between the acknowledgment of the existence of sexual abuse and its appreciation. Some persons who confirm the existence of sexual abuse of minors in Africa believe that this should be a concern. 51% of the participants think that sexual abuse by clergy and religious is also a serious problem in Africa, while 19% think it is but minor, 32% think it is not a problem because there are only isolated cases. Only 5% of the participants believe that it is not a problem at all. More women than men admit that it is a problem. Further exploration could help to understand the baseline of the appreciation of the issue.

Whether committed by clergy or not, the results of the studies show that the cases of sexual abuse against children and vulnerable adults are not isolated cases in Africa. The sexual abuse of vulnerable adults might be higher, but this cannot be a reason to undermine the urgency of the actions to take to protect the children. The parable of the lost sheep invites us to care for every child that is lost as if they were ninety-nine out of a hundred (Luke 1:1-4). Thus, the child sexual abuse issue should be a concern for the church in Africa, not only in solidarity with the universal church but because every local church is directly involved and affected by the issue in various ways. We are one body of Christ who feels and shares the pain and joy of other members. The church in Africa must take serious measures to prevent new cases of child sexual abuse.

Thus, recognition, denial, and avoidance are three dominant attitudes that inform the way sexual abuse seems to be addressed in Africa today. Maybe the so-called culture of silence is lived out through these behaviours. Needless to mention, there are a good number of clergy and religious in Africa who support the taking of responsibility and actions for institutional and legal changes within the church and society in order to create a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults.

II The Complexity of the Sexual Abuse Issue and Its Challenges in Africa

This semester, I had my first class on Vocational growth and the Prevention of Child Abuse two days after the CIAS presented the report to the Conference of Bishop and the Media in France. But as usual, I introduced my class by asking a provocative question to the students, inquiring what they think about child abuse in the Church. No one disagreed that it is also present in Africa, but some of them asked sceptical questions, pointing out the society and the media's evil intention of destroying the Church and affirming that this is not a serious issue but isolated case in Africa.

Without responding to the reactions, I showed a video on the report of the CIAS. I could feel the silence in the classroom as we were hearing the data of the cases and the testimonies of survivors. I then presented some results of the survey I conducted in an African context. After that, we had an open conversation on what we heard, felt, and our thoughts. The conversation reflected more the pain caused by the situation and the compassion. I could feel the emotional shift and the trouble provoked by the exposure to the data.

What struck me the most, was the questions raised by the students that were expressing their feeling of loss, not knowing how to make meaning of the

situation and how to deal with it. How do we explain that a priest comes to sexually abuse a child after so many years of religious and spiritual training? Are the abusers mentally troubled? How can we know that a person has a psychological problem that could lead to abuse? How can we care for the abused in our ministry? Do we also care for the abusers? How do we recognize and deal with the cases of false allegations? What could be the impact of this situation on the pastoral relationships in Africa? Are we going to develop a distance and very cool relationship for the sake of self-protection from fake accusations? These questions asked by my students, all religious from different religious congregations in theological training, stress the complexity of sexual abuse, especially on minors.

III An Interdisciplinary Competence to respond to the Issue of Sexual Abuse

We need interdisciplinary competence to understand the issue of sexual abuse. The right way to deal with the cases and to develop a culture of prevention also requires collaboration between multiple disciplines and expertise. Theology alone cannot understand the issue of sexual abuse in general, particularly the sexual abuse caused by parents, caregivers, priests, and religious people. This issue implies theological, spiritual, psychological, and anthropological dimensions. Sexual abuse of minors is a psychological, social, anthropological, and theological problem. Only such a holistic approach could help to address it effectively.

1. Interdisciplinarity for Integral Human Development

The training of priests and religious people has always been understood as a process of integral development that integrates the human, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. The issue of sexual abuse is an invitation to ask what

is not going right and where changes are needed to make the training a process of growth and transformation. To respond to this question, an interdisciplinary competence is necessary to assess the content and the process of the training in formation houses, regardless of the differences among the religious congregations and seminaries. Formators also need an interdisciplinary competence to be responsive to the complexity of our society and religious/priestly formation. Emotional growth is mentioned in many studies and reflections on sexual abuse; this can only be properly addressed in the process of formation and not only through psychological assessments of the candidates. How do we make of the time of training a process of holistic growth and how do we assess if the goals are achieved? This is where an interdisciplinary approach is important.

2. Reimagining Theological Education

Theologians should ask how they could reimagine a theological education that could foster integral human development and a culture of safety and protection. A renewed theological education to train pastoral and ecclesial agents who embody and live out a culture of the child and vulnerable, adults safeguarding, and protection is necessary.ⁱ Pope Francis said this in his letter to the church in Chile:

I invite all centers of religious formation, theology schools, institutes of higher learning, seminaries, houses of formation and spirituality to promote a theological reflection that is capable of rising to the challenge of the present time, to promote a mature, adult faith that assumes the vital humus of the people of God with their searching and questioning.ⁱⁱ

The Apostolic Constitution, *Veritatis Gaudium* is a strong call to the renewal of the ecclesiastical studies, theology particularly, to respond to the challenge of

our time. In my understanding, the renewal of a theological education that will lead to a radical transformation should be made at three interrelated levels: the purpose, the content, and the process of the theological education.

Reimagining the Purpose of Theological Education

What you see, is what you get, so people say. What theology do we want to develop and teach today? What would be the storyline of the theology that will be relevant for the church today? According to the classic definition, theology is faith seeking understanding. This works as a metaphor through which the whole project of theology has been approached. The rational understanding of the content of the faith is the heart of theological endeavor and education. This is generally represented by the dyad faith and reason; faith seeks understanding through reason and reason seeks the light of faith to be coherent with the fullness of truth revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Getting the knowledge and the truth, about God, His creation, and His ways of doing with His people is what theological education is supposed to be. The transformation and growth process in all the dimensions of the student is missing in this way of understanding the project of theology. I believe that the understanding that theology is seeking is not for itself. It implies that the theological understanding would lead to more love of God and his service. The potential change that theological education implies is presented as an immediate consequence. It is a byproduct, not an explicit goal or purpose that is intentionally and directly pursued. The reality of abuses in the church reminds us that the transformative dimension of theological education is the hardest goal to achieve. It does not have to be taken for granted and does not happen in any theological education. It is the cornerstone of the renewal of the church today. Living our faith should not be taken for granted once we get the knowledge and truth of our faith.

The metaphor by which we approach reality determines our focus and it constructs it differently. Today, I think it is important that theological education explicitly integrates a transformative dimension. Through this new paradigm, theology should be viewed as ‘faith seeking transformative understanding’. Theological education understood as faith seeking understanding puts the dialogue between faith and reason in the center. The transformation is missing or is implicit. The goal or end of theological education seems to be fed by knowledge and trained people full of knowledge as one of my professors used to say. To respond to our present time of a “bold cultural revolution,” ecclesiastical studies need to make a “dangerous effort at a radical paradigm shift” (Pope Francis, VG, 3).

Addressing theology as faith seeking transformative understanding is a paradigm shift. We move from the dyad Faith and Reason to a triad of faith-reason-transformation. Transformation is the purpose center, only a kind of understanding that transformation is wanted. Transformation is associated with the will and affection, which result in decision-making and action. Today, faith, reason, and transformation should explicitly be put in dialogue in the process of theological reflection and education. Theologians should be open and curious to ask what they will do differently if they center transformation in their way of approaching theological education. When we approach theology as faith seeking transformative understanding, we discover three levels or types of transformations. First, that transformative understanding is about the way to do theology itself. There is a paradigm shift that goes with a new theological hermeneutics, which is requested by Pope Francis in *Veritatis Gaudium*. Secondly, we have the transformation of all those who are engaged in the process of theological education. Third, engaging in faith seeking transformative understanding moves us to take a decision to transform the reality, the world around us. Such a way of embracing theology has transforming power.

Theologians should ask if the purpose of theological education is not to fill heads with knowledge and truths but to support an ongoing transformation in the light of faith, what difference would this make in the way we do theology? The paradigm shift I am suggesting in this paper should inform the choice of strategic orientations for theological education, the knowledge objectives, and the way of doing theology itself. Approaching theology as faith seeking transformative understanding should influence the goals of a course or program, the learning process, and the final exams. From the perspective of faith seeking transformative understanding, the purpose of theological education must be to offer a process for becoming a new being, transformed by faith to be a loving transforming presence in the world.

Alternative Theological Categories

As a process of faith seeking transformative understanding, theology should be dynamic to be relevant and effective in a particular time and space as ours. After an analysis of the factors that contributed to the *pauperization* of our church and a reflection on how theological education can be a relevant source for the development of a culture of protection and safeguarding, I suggest that to become a transformative power, the whole project of theology should integrate empathy, vulnerability, and relational responsibility as theological categories and new frameworks for an alternative theology for our time.

Empathy

Empathy is the transformation that theological education should pursue today. The crisis of sexual abuse is a crisis of empathy. Empathy is a human and relation capacity that enables us to “move out of ourselves and into the other person’s experience, seeing the world with that person, as if we were that

person.”ⁱⁱⁱ Empathy is about the capability to listen, feel, understand, and respond to the lived experience of the other. Empathy is a spontaneous attitude or an inclination to seek to understand other people’s perspectives, thoughts, desires, and feelings. An empathic relation is a relation that is decentered from the self and centered on the inner life of the other. Empathy as a way of being with others, make a possible deep connection with the self and others.

Empathy is a relational power that transforms. Empathy opens to connection with the feelings of the other and disposes to love and compassion. One cannot be connected to empathy and hurt without feeling bad. Becoming fully human as revealed in Jesus, is demonstrating the value of empathy in one’s way of living and ministering. Empathy is the condition of compassion and conversion. To heal in a transformative way from the wound of sexual abuse, the people of God need to develop empathy, for it is only by entering into the world of the wounded, borrowing their thoughts and feelings, and by coming back to ourselves that transformation takes place.

The culture of covering up sexual abuses would not happen if we had empathic relations with the victims. The abuses are made possible by dissociating ourselves from others. Violence happens where empathy is absent. The practice of covering up child sexual abuse in the church is inconsistent with justice and care for the vulnerable that the church professes. When honesty and consistency lack, empathy’s power is draining. A loving response fulfills empathy.

Thus, to be and prepare for a transformative way of living, theological education should seek to support the development of the virtue of empathy. Empathy should be the main characteristic of the new wineskins that theological education should help to produce. It is through empathy that church members can individually and collectively heal and become a healing power. Theological development of empathy as divine and human power will be relevant and

meaningful for contemporary society. According to Ciaramicoli and Ketcham,^{iv} empathy is the ground on which honesty, humility, acceptance, tolerance, gratitude, faith, hope, and forgiveness can grow. They are both a sign and fruit of true empathy. This shows how empathy should be at the center of theological education today. What if empathy became a central category of theological reflection of our time? Could theology develop empathy as a virtue? Empathy is better developed through experience and practice. How could our formation houses and academic communities be places where people experience empathy in their relations and practice it through the process of studies and formation? Embracing empathy connects us to our own vulnerability that tells us to do no harm but show compassion and love.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is another theological paradigm for theological reflection and education to respond effectively to the challenge of our time. Vulnerability is commonly associated with weakness and failure. It means being defenseless and at risk of being hurt. That is why we generally do not want to be vulnerable.^v A positive discourse on vulnerability can be suspected of romanticization. Yet, vulnerability is a divine and human characteristic.^{vi} Vulnerability is a dimension of the Imago Dei that is why God is not an impassible God.^{vii} In Ivory Coast, we frequently understand the members of charismatic groups and movements speaking of “touching the heart of God” by the intercession prayer. This implies that God is emotionally vulnerable. The ability to love and show compassion goes with divine vulnerability. Jesus shared our humanity fully except sin experienced vulnerability. He was vulnerable as a child. During his public life, he also felt vulnerable when he cried in Jerusalem and at the death of Lazarus. Jesus felt vulnerable during His passion as well.

Vulnerability characterizes our human condition as children of God. It is a sign of our need to be cared for and be loved by God the Father and others. The meaning of vulnerability is a call to care for and love. This is a place to experience our nature and encounter God. Hence, human vulnerability must be respected and embraced as a sacred place where we open our hearts to experience love by receiving and giving. This human vulnerability is God's handmaid. Jensen speaks of "graced vulnerability" the one that reflects in a child.^{viii} It is a sign of our need for each other and a possibility to experience empathy and compassion for others. Jesus showed vulnerability and response to the need to care for children (Mk, 10: 13-15; Lk, 9: 48). This type of constitutive vulnerability is what makes us humble, disposes us to be loved and be cared for by God and others.^{ix} For Mambrick (2012), "vulnerability is the willingness to take a risk of allowing any event, belief, presence, interest or emotion of your life to be 'on the table' when it is useful to glorify God by encouraging a fellow believer."^x Violating or abusing the vulnerability that is a dimension of our human character is abusing God himself and his creation. Where we see vulnerability, we should hear a cry for care and love. Vulnerability is also a unique place to encounter God by welcoming and caring. As we grow, our human vulnerability takes many forms, but it never disappears; it constitutes our human condition. The awareness of human vulnerability is the condition of humility.

However, there is a handmade vulnerability through harm, violence, and abuse. The vulnerability that comes from a history of violence, harm, and nature is different from vulnerability as an aspect of our human condition and a sign of our need for each other. It comes from the violation of the commandment to not harm or do evil. The divine-human vulnerability is a potentiality while the vulnerability that is caused by violence, such as sexual abuse against children, is

a wound that needs healing. The first is a sign of our human identity as *Imago Dei* and the second sign of sin in human history.

The way the church addresses the issue of sexual abuse implies something about her relation to vulnerability. Covering up the abuses can be a symptom of the difficulty to accept and integrate vulnerability. The church, like society in general, seems to have a problem with vulnerability, which is wrongly understood as weakness and failure. Covering up the cases of sexual abuse of minors can have two meanings: First, it is a violation of human vulnerability. Where vulnerability is a call for caring; the abuse of a minor or vulnerable person is a failure of empathy. Secondly, it can be understood as a denial of human vulnerability. We develop defense mechanisms in our relationship in order to introduce ourselves as a strong person and hide our vulnerability, the divine as well as the handmaid vulnerability. In the formation process, individual and communal vulnerability is not always welcome. To survive, people would invest energy to hide them by wearing a mask. Yet, the denial of vulnerability is a denial of human nature and sometimes the wounds we carry from our history. It is through the integration of our vulnerability that we grow in wholeness, integrity, and humility. The integration of vulnerability in the sense of the self will facilitate congruence and self-acceptance. In many cases, these are our split or hidden vulnerabilities that lead us to abuse others. People who do not have a sense of vulnerability can easily harm and abuse others.

Unless the church as a whole and each Christian individually integrate vulnerability as a divine and human dimension, the conversion, healing, and growth out of the crisis of abuse cannot be complete. To become a wounded healer, each local church should admit its vulnerability and violation of the divine vulnerability. Sexuality, emotional instability, and affective immaturity are frequently mentioned in the reflections on clergy sexual abuse. How could houses of formation be a place where the expression of vulnerability is valued so

that people can be transparent and ask for help in their process of integral growth and wholeness? How sensitive and responsive are formators to the vulnerability of those in formation? Vulnerability is a theological paradigm that seems central for our present time. Theology can help develop a constructive understanding of vulnerability. What would Christology, ecclesiology and anthropology say if developed through the paradigm of vulnerability? How can the context of theological education become a place where people experience the true meaning of human vulnerability and take responsibility for it?

Ubuntu as a Relational Responsibility

Finally, I believe relational responsibility should be a third theological paradigm to develop an alternative theological education capable to foster a culture of protection and safeguarding. The new dispositions to address the cases of child abuse in the Catholic church are grounded on the value of social justice. The criminalization of sexual abuses by clergy has a strong shift in the way this issue has been addressed in order to ensure the protection of the dignity and rights of the wounded. The emphasis on the accountability before the law, required of any clergy found guilty of sexual abuse against a minor or vulnerable adult, is another dimension of the application of justice. The recent *Motu Proprio vos estis lux mundi* that highlight the duty to signal the cases of abuse by a clergy reinforces the will of the church to protect children and have the abuser be accountable before the law for his acts.

Punishment of the abuser is at the center of the new disposition of the church. The church ensures institutional responsibility through a protocol and guide of ethical integrity in ministry for each organization. After that, personal responsibility dominates the discourse on child protection. To create a culture of protection and safeguarding, a perspective of relational responsibility can be a relevant alternative. Without neglecting individual responsibility and

accountability, relational responsibility will invite us to ask how, as a church, society, and community, we have come to create a context in which sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults flourish. How are we all accountable for those abuses, for the victims and abusers? How are we doing things together differently to create an alternative culture of protection and safeguarding?

The concept of Ubuntu is an accurate expression of our inter-human dimension that goes with an intrinsic relational responsibility. If we are connected and belong to the same humanity, taking responsibility for what happens to others is not an option but becoming who I am: Ubuntu being. According to the ethics of relational responsibility, we are responsible for our brothers and sisters, the victims, and the abusers. In a way, we are accountable for who our brother has become because we share the same humanity. This is the whole message Pope Francis communicates in *Fratelli Tutti*.^{xi} Approaching the crisis of clergy sexual abuse from the perspective of relational responsibility invites us to go beyond an individualistic approach to safeguarding. A lot is said about the psychological health of the religious and priests who abused children, but some of them might have been wounded during their formation. Without psychologizing the formation to the religious life and priesthood, do we take seriously the recommendation to integrate psychology in the process of formation? Does the crisis of child sexual abuse influence our theological reflection and education? How can theological education take as its responsibility to prepare a new generation of priests who distinguish themselves in the practice of relational responsibility? These are questions we can hear if we take a stance of relational responsibility to reflect on child abuse.

Concluding Remarks:

Religious transformation and theological education transformation is not a byproduct of the knowledge informed by a faith that is taught but the end of the

process: allowing people to become new beings, integrally transformed. However, framing relevant educational objectives will not be enough to design religious and theological education as a transformative process. The process is key. The process, the how is very important. Yet, the process seems to be a forgotten and neglected dimension of theological education. The transformation takes place in the process. The quality of the product depends highly on the process, not only on the intention or expected outcomes. In *Veritatis Gaudium*, Pope Francis invites us to review the content as well as the pedagogy of ecclesiastical studies. It highlights the content and the pedagogy in order to initiate a courageous cultural revolution in ecclesiastical studies in a creative but faithful way.^{xii} Within the process of theological education is the interactions. How do we practice theological education? How shall we practice religious and theological education in order to instigate a transformation process? How do we operationalize religious and educational objectives? A transforming understanding of faith through reason implies a need to seek an effective way of doing theology and religious training, which has an immediate implication on life and the praxis. Interdisciplinarity, dialogue, and systemic connection between theology and pastoral care are concrete attitudes that Pope Francis suggests creating a new way of doing theology for our time.

ⁱ Marie-Jo Thiel. *L'Église Catholique face aux Abus Sexuels sur Mineurs*. Paris : Bayard, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Pope Francis, "Letter to the Church in Chile", 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arthur Ciaramicoli and Khaterine Ketcham. *The Power of Empower*. England: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 71.

^{iv} Arthur Ciaramicoli and Katherine Ketcham. *The Power of Empathy*. England: Penguin Books, 2000.

^v Hambrick, *Vulnerability*, 2012.

^{vi} Roberto Sirvent. *Embracing Vulnerability : Human and Divine*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015.

^{vii} David H. Jensen. *Graced Vulnerability : A Theology of Childhood*. New York: Pilgrim, 2005.

^{viii} David C. Jensen. *Graced Vulnerability : A theology of Children*. New York: Pilgrim, 2005.

^{ix} Roberto Sirvent. *Embracing Vulnerability : Human and Divine*. Oregon, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015.

^x Brad C. Hambrick. *Vulnerability : Blessing in the Beatitudes*. New York: P. & R Publishing, 2012, p.7

^{xi} Pope Francis, « Social Encyclical. » *Fratelli Tutti*. Vatican : 2020.

^{xii} Pope Francis, « Apostolic Constitution ». *Veritatis Gaudium*, Vatican : 2018